

Nuclear Talks with North Korea?

September 14, 2017

The accelerated pace of North Korea’s nuclear and missile [testing](#), and continued [threats](#) against the United States and its allies have raised questions over the usefulness, timing, scope, and goals of any diplomatic talks with Pyongyang. An aggressive negotiation strategy is one of many [options](#) available to the United States. The Trump Administration has [stated](#) that its approach of “maximum pressure”—through strengthened [United Nations sanctions](#), increased economic pressure, and ramped up [military cooperation](#) with allies—is aimed at convincing Pyongyang “to de-escalate and return to the path of dialogue.” South Korean President Moon has [said](#), “[W]e have to add dialogue to the current menu of sanctions and pressure” under the right conditions.

Trump Administration officials have made a variety of statements on whether or when talks should occur. On August 30, President Trump [tweeted](#), “Talking is not the answer!” and in another tweet [called](#) the South Korean President’s efforts to resume dialogue “appeasement.” Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis, however, [called](#) the U.S. strategy “peaceful pressure” that was ultimately seeking to convince North Korea to enter negotiations on denuclearization. Pentagon [officials](#) have said that their actions to bolster deterrence are in support of [diplomacy](#).

Timing

Those who advocate for immediately starting [talks](#), including former U.S. officials who faced [past nuclear crises](#) with North Korea, view them as a way to [de-escalate](#) tensions and lessen the chance of war. However, South Korean President Moon Jae-in [said](#) after a September 14 North Korean missile test that “dialogue was now impossible” and could only be pursued once new sanctions have had a greater impact. A similar view, expressed by [Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe](#), among others, is that talks in the near term are counterproductive and possibly embolden or reward Pyongyang for its actions. During the summer of 2017, South Korean President Moon proposed low-level dialogues, but North Korea rejected the overtures.

Preconditions

Whether and what conditions should be met before diplomatic talks with North Korea could begin is unresolved, and may be a key stumbling block to any resumption of dialogue. The United States and Japan have said that talks would only be possible after North Korea commits to full denuclearization. Secretary of State Tillerson has said that North Korea must take “[concrete steps](#)” to reduce the threat posed by its nuclear and missile programs before the United States would consider talks, which would be conditioned upon an understanding that the [ultimate goal](#) is moving toward denuclearization.

Over the past several years, North Korea generally has rejected dialogue on denuclearization unless other countries drop their preconditions as well as take certain steps, such as the United States withdrawing its protection of South Korea and/or all nuclear weapon states disarming.

China and Russia have issued a joint statement proposing a “[dual freeze](#)” approach with preconditions for North Korea (a moratorium on missile and nuclear tests) and for the United States and South Korea (a halt in “large-scale” joint military exercises). Once these conditions were met, negotiations would include denuclearization and peace talks. The United States and South Korea have rejected these conditions, and North Korea has accelerated its testing.

Precedents

The United States and North Korea have conducted negotiations over Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs in the [past](#). Under the Agreed Framework, a U.S.-DPRK agreement reached in 1994, and that collapsed seven years later, North Korea froze plutonium production and opened its facilities to international inspectors in exchange for the United States and other countries providing two nuclear power plants and heavy fuel oil. After the Agreed Framework collapsed in 2002, the countries entered into the Six-Party Talks (2003-2009) among China, Japan, North Korea, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. In 2005, the six parties produced a [joint statement](#) in which North Korea agreed to abandon its nuclear weapons programs in exchange for energy assistance, a U.S. security guarantee, as well as talks over a peace settlement with South Korea, normalization of relations with the United States, and other matters. A subsequent Six-Party agreement was only partially implemented, however, before disagreements over [implementation](#) caused its collapse. On February 29, 2012, the United States and North Korea reached the “Leap Day” [agreement](#) in which Pyongyang would halt nuclear and long-range missile tests, and nuclear activities at its Yongbyon facility in return for a U.S. pledge of large-scale food aid and an increase in people-to-people exchanges. The agreement broke down within weeks, after North Korea launched a long-range rocket.

Goals

The United States says the goal of diplomacy with North Korea is the “peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” and that the goal of talks would be the complete, verifiable, irreversible [disarmament](#). U.S. Acting Assistant Secretary of State Susan Thornton said that the United States would “never recognize North Korea as a nuclear state.” Some former U.S. negotiators argue that this goal is achievable with enough diplomatic [effort](#) and coordination with [China](#).

However, North Korea has said that it will not give up its nuclear weapons under the current regime of Kim Jong-un. Therefore, in order to halt weapon advancements and lower tensions, some analysts [argue](#) for a different near term goal: freezing nuclear and missile programs, which would require a testing moratorium, and possibly verification of nuclear facilities. Former Secretary of Defense William Perry, for example, [says](#) the focus now should be an agreement that would halt nuclear and ICBM testing, and commit Pyongyang to not export nuclear technology.

Others say that since North Korea will not be persuaded to give up its nuclear weapons, talks should focus on convincing North Korea [not to use](#) its weapons. Former Secretary of Defense Robert [Gates](#) argues that acceptance of a limited North Korean nuclear force is necessary to avoid war, and could include a testing moratorium, limits on missile range, and verification measures. Others argue that dialogue and confidence-building measures could [reduce](#) the chance of military conflict. This could include hotlines or other transparency measures, such as were established between the United States and the Soviet Union and between India and Pakistan.

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